

In Memory of Donald “Duck” Dunn

by Peter Stone Brown

Late last night I logged onto Facebook, and was shocked to find out that legendary bass player Donald Duck Dunn had died in his sleep while on tour in Japan. Dunn was one of the major forces behind what may well be my favorite genre of music, Memphis Soul and especially the Memphis soul that came out on the Stax-Volt label in the '60s. He played on ever Otis Redding studio album and two of the live ones, *Live In Europe* and *Monterey Pop*, and on countless other hits and albums by Sam & Dave, Eddie Floyd, Carla Thomas, Arthur Conley and of course was a member of Booker T & The MGs, one of the tightest units ever in rhythm and blues and rock and roll.

Dunn was self-taught. He learned to play by playing along with records. But he instinctively understood the role of the bass player is to lock in with the drummer and create a groove. And what a groove he created. Simply put, Duck Dunn was a player who knew what to do, and equally important, he knew what not to do. He didn't play lead bass, he wasn't flashy and he totally understood that less is more. Yet his bass parts hit you every time, in your soul, in your gut and they made you want to move and they made you want to dance. Most of all he understood that the song comes first.

Dunn played on close to 200 albums. The discography on his website is amazing, as is the list of musicians he worked with both in the studio and onstage. In addition to the greats on Stax-Volt, it runs from Ray Charles to the Staple Singers to Neil Young and Joan Baez.

I saw Duck Dunn play three times. The first was the tour debut of Levon Helm & The RCO All Stars, which was supposed to include three of the MGs, but Booker T and Steve Cropper didn't show up. The gig was so shambolic that Dunn appeared to be the only one onstage who knew what he was doing. The second was the Bob Dylan 30th Anniversary celebration at Madison Square Garden, a show that ended up being overshadowed by the rantings of some bald woman. In addition the atmosphere in the arena didn't lend itself to paying attention to any musical subtlety.

However, today a friend posted a video of the rehearsals for show of Dylan, Clapton, Dunn, Cropper, GE Smith, and I'm assuming Jim Keltner on drums doing “It Takes A Lot To Laugh, It Takes A Train To Cry.” Dunn's bass immediately elevated the song to another level.

A few years after that I joined some friends to see Booker T & the MGs at a club in one of the casinos in Atlantic City. The room was intimate, our seats were right at the stage, and they came out and played hit after hit after hit, and best of all, it was quite clear they were having fun doing it. In short, it was a perfect show and they were everything you wanted them to be.

For more than four decades the records Duck Dunn contributed to gave me countless hours of pure pleasure, and with any luck they'll continue to do so for the rest of my life.